Testimony
Before the
House Environment, Technology, and Regulations Subcommittee
Of the
House Committee on Science

Mr. Chairman, and members of the committee, my name is Kenneth Dierschke. I am President of the Texas Farm Bureau and I am here today on their behalf. I am a cotton and grain farmer from San Angelo, Texas. I appreciate the opportunity to speak today in support of HR 5136, the National Integrated Drought Information System Act of 2006. This legislation, when enacted will be of significant benefit to agriculture producers as well as the various state and federal agencies working to address weather monitoring systems.

For the record, let me state, in part, the American Farm Bureau Policy regarding the National Weather Service.

"We support accurate, timely reporting of weather information and the maintenance and adequate funding of current weather analysis and information dissemination systems. We encourage federal, state and private agencies to work to improve these systems and the coordination of user support and federal funds to assure continuity and improvement."

Last summer, hurricanes Katrina and Rita plowed into the Gulf Coast with all the fury that Mother Nature can muster. The images of this catastrophe were powerful and delivered to every home in America. Americans and our government rightly responded with unprecedented levels of assistance for the crippled Gulf Coast.

There is now another catastrophe unfolding across a large part of the nation. Part of it is playing out in my home state of Texas. Drought is literally squeezing the life out of Texas agriculture. This disaster is different from hurricanes – only after weeks and months does its effect begin to become apparent. It's only when a spark bursts into flame in the tinder dry grass, consuming homes, barns, livestock and human lives, does the public hear much about it – again through the vivid images on our television screens.

The Texas fires have been graphic evidence of the drought, but the burning countryside is only one symptom of this catastrophe. In Texas,

the economic impact of the drought will more than match the effects of Hurricane Rita, the category five storm that hit our Gulf Coast. The Texas Cooperative Extension Service estimates that over $1 billion damage was done to the agricultural economy in 2005, with additional losses caused by the wildfires in the Texas panhandle in March of this year. Over 1 million acres of range and grassland was destroyed with thousands of miles of fence, animals, and buildings destroyed in a little more than a week.

Drought is a slow motion disaster – it's a slow and creeping death for plant and animal life and potentially for the agricultural industry. Each day without rainfall deepens the crisis for the farm and ranch families.

In 2005 more than 200 of Texas' 254 counties were designated disaster areas due to weather related events. Unfortunately, during the last decade and a half, this has been a very common occurrence.

On the Internet, there is a web site called "Drought Monitor." It paints an interesting picture, stage by stage, graphically showing how this monster drought has consumed more and more of the countryside with each passing day. Altogether, some 20 states are impacted.

While some of our state has been fortunate to receive some rainfall in the recent months, the state as a whole is still in a drought situation. Specifically, the Rio Grande Valley and along the South Texas coast has

already lost most of the 2006 crop. Producers will be depending on insurance payments to keep them afloat until 2007.

When farm and ranchlands are in the grip of a severe drought, there are many levels of damage. There is the immediate loss of a crop, but also, in the case of range land, it can take many years of careful management and the cooperation of Mother Nature to set things right again.

Today, our focus is on Drought preparedness and recognition. While this is not an attempt to cast blame, current technology does not provide information necessary for a producer to avoid the impact of droughts.

The strength of our weather information system is the very high accuracy of its short term predictions. The weakness is that these highly accurate forecasts do little to prepare farmers and ranchers for the impact of extended periods of drought or other weather related disasters. By the time the news of a rain front is reported, decisions have been made, crops have been lost and an economic disaster becomes a companion of the natural disaster.

Farm Bureau supports the funding of research by NOAA to improve the ability to more accurately forecast these catastrophic events. Refining the techniques that can identify these events would truly be an asset to the agricultural industry.

The frequency of drought and weather related disaster is changing agriculture in ways that are difficult to anticipate. In our view, HR 5136 is an investment in new technology and systems that will benefit the nation far beyond an individual farm or ranch. But speaking for those farmers and ranchers, Congressman Hall's bill will certainly help us prepare for an all too uncertain future.

Farmers and ranchers across much of Texas face the grim possibility that there may be very little to harvest in Texas this year. We hope that we can salvage enough of this crop year with various forms of assistance and aid so that there can be another year beyond the dismal conditions

we face right now. If we can more accurately predict the next drought cycle, our planning and preparation will improve as well.

I appreciate the opportunity to be here today, and will be happy to address any questions from the committee.

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